

REFLECTIONS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Amanda Groff

Luke 11:1-13

I recently finished reading *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church* by Rachel Held Evans. I had followed the progressive Christian blogger online for a few years, but her recent untimely death prompted me to check out her book from the library. As I read, I found a kindred spirit in Rachel: just a year apart in age, both growing up in a conservative church, listening to the same Christian rock bands, playing the same ridiculous youth group games and “feeling sorry for the rest of humanity on account of its certain destiny in hell”. Clad in my youth group-fundraiser t-shirt that mocked evolution, I was on a mission to spread the gospel, along with a healthy sprinkling of arrogance and judgement.

Then I went to college. I attended Christian Fellowship where I played more stupid games and was told in my small group divided by gender, that a godly woman was subservient to her husband. It didn't sit well with me. Bit by bit, as I met so many different kinds of people, and learned so many new things, I began questioning most of what I held as true during my young life. My boyfriend at the time broke up with me pretty quickly after that, essentially for not being religious enough. But not before gifting me with this enormous Life Application Study Bible, which finally got cracked open after a 20 year respite, when Ethel asked me to speak.

The chapter I chose to reflect on is Luke 11, where Jesus teaches his disciples the now-familiar Lord's Prayer. After that, he talks about the purpose and method of prayer in versus 5-10.

Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me and I have nothing to set before him.’

Then the one inside answers, ‘Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's BOLDNESS he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

To pray with BOLDNESS, my giant study Bible tells me, means persistence. Not like a nagging child, badgering God into giving us what we want, but with a FOCUS on what we are searching for... a mantra, almost, to make us PAY ATTENTION to the Spirit... As a way to change and refocus our OWN heart and mind, to understand and express the intensity of our own need, and to recognize God's presence around and in us.

At some point, I stopped believing prayer could change what was to happen. My idea of God morphed into more of a Star Wars “Force” and less of a “white-bearded guy in the clouds” who could, if asked nicely enough, wave a wand and cure an illness, or make that promotion happen, or send that sports team to victory. So I stopped seeing the point in prayer altogether.

I'm not well-versed on the “Progressive Christian” application of prayer, but as my own understanding of faith and God has evolved, I see it more as a pathway to gratefulness, awareness, to the Force telling me to pay attention.

For a while, I held animosity in my heart towards my childhood church and pastor. Resentment for their exclusionary teachings and for the pain of “cognitive dissonance” (as my husband calls it) during my college years, as I let go of those teachings and expanded my world view. For the last 20 years, roaming occasionally from church to church, I continued, half-heartedly, to knock on God’s door. I am grateful to this congregation for providing the environment where I heard the Spirit whisper after such a long time. I found a body of seekers – not with all the answers, but with all the same questions... and lots of ideas. I found a place to fit in as I continue my seeking.

My perspective since joining here has expanded. We are not a perfect church and my childhood church was not a terrible church. I received many blessings there and am positive being part of the youth group and their stupid games kept me out of trouble. Obviously there are denominational issues worth fighting over, but Rachel Held Evans encourages us to appreciate the beauty in different faith traditions, even though they may not be the right fit for us. She visualizes the biblical description of God’s house, with its many rooms in the following quote from her book, with:

“...the Presbyterians hanging out in the library, the Baptists running the kitchen, the Anglicans setting the table, the Anabaptists washing feet with the hose in the backyard, the Lutherans making liturgy for the laundry, the Methodists stoking the fire in the hearth, the Catholics keeping the family history and the Pentecostals throwing open all the windows and doors.”

Rachel says, “when we check our pride long enough to pay attention to the presence of the Spirit gusting across the globe, we catch glimpses of a God who defies our categories and expectations, a God who both inhabits and transcends our worship, art, theology, culture, experiences and ideas.”

Jesus told his disciples to ask, seek and knock, persistently and boldly...relentlessly. My plan is to just continue to do this, with gratitude for the path I’ve been led to, and confident in Jesus’s words that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

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Anne Teresa
Hosea 11:1-13

The Old Testament reading for today is from the book of Hosea, chapter 1 verses 2-10. This is a puzzling story – God is clearly upset with Israel, and in anger directs his prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute, Gomer. But before we dive into this story, let’s set a bit of context. Hosea is one of what are known as the Minor Prophets, a collection of 12 Old Testament books. The title minor refers to length, not significance. Roughly in chronological order, each of these books gives a glimpse into the spiritual landscape and history of Israel, challenging the status quo through prophets called to speak on God’s behalf. Eugene Peterson says that the Hebrew prophets provide the help we so badly need if we are to stay alert and understand the conditions in which we can live faithful and obedient lives. For the ways of the world, says Peterson — its assumptions, its values, its methods of going about its work— are never on the side of God. Never. Over and over again, God uses these prophets to separate his people from the cultures in which they live, putting them back on the path of simple faith and obedience in defiance of all that the world admires and rewards.

Hosea, whose name means “salvation”, lived in the 8th century BC. His ministry extended to some 60 years and he was the only prophet of Israel of this time who left any written prophecy. He was a contemporary of Micah and Amos and Isaiah. The book of Hosea is intended to

demonstrate God's steadfast love for his people; God's jealousy and judgment; and God's healing and restoration.

In Hosea God is giving the people of Israel what my Texas grandfather would call "unshirred hell". God has had it with the children of Israel. What had Israel done to make God so angry? It had been 200 years since God brought them out of Egypt – rescued them from slavery and delivered them into their own country. And what have they done? There was widespread violence, corruption and idolatry. They had a series of bad kings and were at war constantly. This was a dark period in Israel's history and they were declining as a nation. They lived as if they were not God's people – but their greatest sin was to not recognize God's love.

God commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer. Together they had 3 children, although it's unclear whether these were Hosea's children or not. This marriage is considered a metaphor for Israel's spiritual adultery and breach of covenant with God. So Hosea obeyed God, and married Gomer, and 14 chapters follow of ups and downs within the marriage, paralleling God's anger, Israel's broken promises and suffering, repentance and restoration. We will never know what Hosea thought about this – was it oh God, how could you humiliate me this way? I'm on your team! I am your prophet telling these people to get their act together! Why are you punishing me? Or did he think, huh, this wouldn't be my first choice, but I always thought Gomer was basically a nice girl, kind of funny and sweet, just made a few bad choices, or maybe she had no choices. Probably Hosea knew she would be unfaithful, as God implies in these verses. And for sure we will never know what Gomer thought about this. We don't read very many pages into the prophets before realizing that there was nothing easygoing about them. Prophets were not popular figures. Gomer may have thought – oh no, God, anyone but a prophet.

Our women's circle has spent the past 2 years reading a great book by Alice Connor called *"Fierce: Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex and Salvation"*. Connor says we don't talk much about women in the Bible and when they do show up, they seem to be players in a man's story. Or their stories are offered as morality tales about how to be better wives and mothers. In later chapters of Hosea Gomer leaves Hosea for another man, Hosea tracks her down, pays money to get her out of this relationship, and brings her home. That's part of the steadfast love metaphor for God and God's children.

Hosea compares Israel's relationship with God as spiritual adultery, using his own marriage to an unfaithful woman as an illustration. Hosea's own reconciliation also illustrates Israel's ultimate restoration. It is a cycle of repentance, redemption, restoration.

As compelling as this story is, to me it's not a story about what makes a good marriage, as some writers suggest. For me, what stands out is this depiction of unconditional love. God always brings us back to God. In verse 10 it says this – "and in the place where it was said to them, you are not my people, it shall be said to them, children of the living God". So how can we believe in and experience unconditional love?

In David Benner's book *Surrender to Love*, he says - I do not think that sin changes how God feels about humans. God is not that fickle. Like loving parents who can be disappointed in their children, that disappointment in no way dilutes their love. If some humans can love this way, how can we question God's ability to do the same? God's love is never compromised by anger. The presence of anger does not mean the absence of love. What a small god we would have if divine character was dependent on our behavior. What kind of different relationship develops when we realize that God can't help loving us? That no one sits outside God's offer of forgiveness? That our sins do not surprise God, or reduce God's love for us?

Benner goes on to say that the willingness to receive the love of God and others **without earning it** is at the heart of both psychological and spiritual growth.

So what does this involve? The words trust and surrender say it all. What most Christians embrace, says Benner, is objective rather than personal knowing. We believe in God's love. But believing is not strong enough to transform us. Belief leaves open the potential for doubt, which can allow fear to reenter. We need a knowing that is deeper than belief. It must be based in experience. That is, letting God's love wash over me, not simply believing it. Experiencing God's love requires coming spending time with God, coming to God in our vulnerability, and considering ways that we still hide from God's love. The journey is not about achievement but about relationship. I don't find this particularly easy. It seems to be a journey of inches and not miles. And it depends upon my ability to let it – whatever it is on this particular day – go. I struggle with accepting the fact that I can't control the outcome of things by trying harder. And that my anxiety blocks my experience of God.

In Anne Lamott's book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, she says - unto us, much is given. We just have to be open for business. God is not a banker or a bean counter. God gives us even more, which is so subversive. We get to keep starting over. Lives change, sometimes quickly, but usually slowly.

I find it challenging to reconcile this God of anger and the God of unconditional love. In a strange way I like this human God of anger – I understand it. You go, God – the Israelites deserved it. But the fact is God keeps coming back to us. Our behavior does not impact God's love. I don't think there is any other way to access this overwhelming thing, this unconditional love, than to choose it, trust it, and sit with it. And I believe that the impediment to this relationship with God is not sin, but fear.

In Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* he writes that the secret in the heart of many people, especially Christians, is that they don't love God. They can't, because the God they've been presented with can't be loved. That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable. God is pretty terrifying in Hosea – that's real anger. Bell says churches try to become more relevant, and missional and welcoming. But if something is wrong with your God, if your God is loving one second and cruel the next, if your God will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years, no amount of clever marketing or compelling language or good music or great coffee will be able to disguise that awful reality. Hell is refusing to trust, and refusing to trust is often rooted in a distorted view of God. To reject God's grace, to turn from God's love, to resist God's telling, will lead to misery.

I wonder what Hosea would think if he knew we were still pondering his words written 2800 years ago; his painful personal story; his beautiful, intense and detailed description of God's inner feelings. Joan Chittister says that love is all we know of God. It is all the proof we need of God. It is the sight of God in our own lives. And I think of the gift of this unconditional love, this bond that does not break, and I find this love, well, just amazing.